

# THIS THING CALLED "LEGALISM"

by William M. Wachtel

In Christian circles one sometimes hears the term "legalism," and the contexts in which it is often used seem to suggest an unfavorable or unpleasant connotation. Yet, the term in itself has an obvious relation to "law" or a legal system--and the importance of law and the need for law cannot be disputed. Not only do all human societies have a system of law to help insure an orderly and equitable way of life, but God Himself saw fit to give His ancient people Israel a law--the Ten Commandments and other statutes--as a basis for their relations with Him and with one another.

Why, then, should "legalism" suggest something undesirable or improper?

Almost every good thing can have a bad effect when it is found out of place or is not used as intended. The classic example is fire, normally an excellent servant, but when out of control a ferocious monster! Law certainly has its place as a guide and helper of good government; but when law is depended on as the means to create conditions that can result only from good character as manifested in the conduct of individuals, then law has been taken out of its proper place and is not functioning properly. In that case, though law in itself is still a good thing, it has--with improper use--some bad and undesirable results!

"Legalism," then, denotes an attitude toward law that asks law to do what it was not intended to do and in fact cannot do. In Christian usage, a "legalist" is one who looks to law (whether divine law or man-made church law) to bring salvation to lost individuals or to effect spiritual changes that lead to Christian maturity in converted individuals.

The Apostle Paul struck at legalism long ago, when he demonstrated that salvation is not based on good works or on keeping God's law. Rather, as he showed, doing good works and

obeying God's law is the result of being saved, not the cause that brings salvation. Ephesians 2:4-10 is very clear that such is the case. Philippians 2:12,13 adds that our effort in working out our own salvation is based on the fact that it is God who is already working in us "both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Thus, we cannot take credit for "earning" salvation. God doesn't owe us a thing! Our obedience to Him, expressed in our good works, is a privilege and a blessing that He permits us to have, not a means whereby we can make God our debtor! Romans 4:1-5 develops the theme of salvation by grace, through faith, and not by works. In fact, much of the teaching in Romans and Galatians is directed toward stressing this truth.

In medieval and modern times, churches have enacted certain laws or regulations in opposition to grace, insisting that salvation can be obtained only by those obedient to such laws. They have also adopted official creeds or "articles of faith" that deny salvation to anyone who does not conform to their requirements. Such practices provide a clear case of legalism. Those who follow these practices are taking law out of its proper sphere and making it the basis for salvation--becoming thereby "legalists."

Paul fought vehemently against the "Judaizers" in Galatia. They were professing Christians and at the same time legalists who required the Gentile converts to embrace the Mosaic Law and be circumcised. They took the law out of its God-ordained place and set it as a requirement for salvation. They were out of order, in opposition to God and to the apostles of Christ (Acts 15:1-31). Their false doctrine had to be exposed as dangerous and destructive!

Legalism today is likewise dangerous and destructive, in whatever form it appears. So-called "cults" are often characterized by some kind of legalism. Their leaders insist that only those who are obedient to the "truth" (as those leaders see it) can be saved. The leaders become then (in their own eyes and in the eyes of those who follow them) the divinely appointed channels of salvation. Anyone who refuses to accept their leadership or their views cannot hope to enter the Kingdom of God.

Typically, such groups are blind to the fact that they are legalists and are also blind to the dangers into which legalists fall! They are like the Pharisees, who were "blind leaders of the blind," ending up in the ditch! (Matt. 15:14.) Moreover, they may be like the Pharisees in their zeal to evangelize, crossing land and sea to carry the message of salvation which they think is found among themselves alone. But if their zeal results in imposing their own legalism on their converts, the latter may end up twice as legalistic as those who converted them! (Matt. 23:15.)

The New Testament doctrine of grace is the potent antidote to all kinds of legalism, wherever found. The truth that God saves men and women apart from any merit on their part, simply on the basis of their trust in Him and willingness to be conformed to the image of His Son, strikes at the very heart of all human pretensions and efforts to make God "owe" us salvation! Our love for God is not something we have created in ourselves and can use as a "bargaining chip" with Him. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Our love toward Him is simply a response which He has awakened within us and for which we can take no credit.

Once we understand the principle of salvation by grace, our hearts become filled with gratitude and joy and we refuse to find satisfaction in any kind of legalistic promises or claims. We realize at last the true basis of salvation in Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him, and we see His gospel as the God-ordained means to initiate and to mature that relationship. We can then view law in a proper way and be thankful that God revealed His law and continues to make it known. His law becomes for us a brilliant light, a guide and a revelation of His will, when we take away the blinders created by all forms of legalism!

**The End**